A Congregation Committed to Antiracism

by Tim Johnson, Pastor of Cherokee Park United Church

It is no easy thing for a predominantly white community of faith to speak openly and honestly about race, racism and the factors that continue making racism front page concerns both locally and nationally. To begin with, like everyone one else, members of predominantly white congregations receive from their earliest formative years an outlook on the world that presumes that to be white is to be superior. Author Joe Feagin refers to this as the “White Racial Frame”.

It is a message reinforced by the telling of history, who and what gets lifted up and who and what gets ignored. Literature, music, and art created by whites are called classics and all other works of culture are assigned to some variation on ethnic work. In many congregations of faith this subtle, but powerful naming of white as superior is reinforced with regular images of a white Jesus, surrounded by Nordic looking disciples with a cast of characters who are white. Children are introduced to these life shaping images at a very early age.

Congregations of faith face other challenges as well in addressing race and racism. Belief in the value of confession and honest reflection provides a powerful tool for truth telling. But predominantly white congregations also share what author Robin DiAngelo refers to as “White Fragility”, a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. Most congregations prefer to avoid conflict whenever possible and conversations about race come laden with the potential for conflict.

Most surprisingly some of the deepest values for congregations of faith can become barriers to honest conversations about race. Many congregations greatly value a universalism enabling us to see each other as one in our humanity. It is born out of a belief that God’s love is for all. The challenge occurs when this universalism collapses, as it often does, into whiteness as a dominant and superior norm for that universalism. Similarly congregations rightfully place a high value on reconciliation. But, reconciliation when placed ahead of the more difficult work of addressing historic and existing injustice, itself becomes a barrier to an open and honest discussion of race. In religious terms, unless reconciliation is preceded by acts of repair (reparation), it can become a form of cheap grace.

Cherokee Park United Church has struggled and continues to struggle with all these dynamics that form a wall to racial justice. We have found no simple answer other than to make a commitment to being an antiracist congregation and follow the path of that commitment wherever it leads. The journey has included such things as incorporating antiracism into the congregation’s mission, infusing world music into worship, balancing the image of a white stained glass Jesus with images of Jesus from many lands and cultures, congregational wide discussion, celebrations honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Monsignor Oscar Romero and supporting artists of color by hosting their exhibits. The commitment has opened up valued relationships with partners from El Salvador and an ongoing relationship with the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Tribal Community.

It is also out of this antiracist commitment that the congregation serves as the Fiscal Agent for ASDIC Metamorphosis (Antiracism Study Dialogue Circles), an award winning antiracism program bringing people together for study and community building, equipping them to address racism. Through Cherokee Park United Church, ASDIC was the recipient of recent Saint Paul Foundation Grants intended to help strengthen and build their capacity in doing antiracism work. Okogyeamon (Dr. Herbert Perkins) is the director of ASDIC, a member of Cherokee Park United Church and an influential voice in the congregation’s ongoing work and commitment. In addition to ASDIC, Cherokee Park United Church is the Fiscal Agent for and co-sponsor of an Annual Overcoming Racism Conference held at Metropolitan State University (November 13, 14, 2015), organized by FREC, the Facilitating Racial Equity Collaborative. Cherokee Park United Church continues struggling with and living into its commitment to be an antiracist community of faith.